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THOMAS RITCHIE'S LETTER,

CONTAINING

REMINISCENCES

OF

HENRY CLAY AND THE COMPROMISE.

[From the Richmond (Va.) Enquirer of Sept. 10th, 1852.]

INTERESTING DOCUMENT.

IT is not for us to comment upon the following narrative of secret history, but we cannot doubt that it will commend itself to the attention and interest of the whole country. The author but redeems a solemn promise in rendering a tribute to an eloquent and great statesman—with whom he had been on intimate terms in early youth, afterwards arrayed against him in decided political hostility and personal non-intercourse, and finally reconciled and made friends again in the work of warding off an angry storm that threatened the safety, nay, the existence of the confederacy. It is most fitting that this unrolling of the curtain of the past, this development of unknown and unwritten history, should find its way to the public through the Enquirer, which was founded by the author of the following letter, an early intimate personal friend of Mr. Clay, and one of his few veteran contemporaries now left on the stage of life, and whose columns, in past times, waged such decided war upon the political principles of Mr. Clay's after life. But we shall not longer detain our readers from the letter itself.

Published 1852.

To the Editors of the Richmond Enquirer.

WASHINGTON, Sept. 6, 1852.

SIRS,

Whilst a great nation is lamenting the death, and paying honors to the memory of one of her most distinguished sons, will you permit me to lay my humble tribute upon *his* grave? Well do I recollect what passed in March 1850, at the hospitable board of Mr. John T. Sullivan, of this city, where I met with Messrs. Clay, William R. King, (the Vice President,) Cobb, (the Speaker of the House of Representatives,) Foote, Toombs, Bradford of Massachusetts, &c. &c. In a most agreeable conversation, I told Mr. Clay, that if he would but settle the agitating question of the day, on fair and honorable principles, and would look no more to the White House, if I survived him, I would plant a laurel on his tomb. Little did I dream at that time of the fate which awaited him;—and little did I anticipate that his subsequent astonishing exertions would have exhausted the powers of his constitution, and that he would so soon have fallen a martyr to his public duties. I come now to plant the simple laurel upon his tomb.

My relations to Mr. Clay have been of various characters. Perhaps I was the oldest acquaintance in Washington, who attended his funeral. I first met with Mr. Clay in Richmond, at the house of my brother-in-law, Governor Brooke, in 1796, before he left Virginia for Kentucky—before he had obtained his license, and before he had completed his legal studies under the auspices of Mr. Brooke, who was subsequently elected Attorney General of the State. Colton truly says, in his *Life of Mr. Clay*, (p. 23, vol. 1.) that “he was for years the pupil and companion of Chancellor Wythe, who, discovering the high promise of his protegee, was not less ambitious to fit him for his destiny than he himself was to attain to it.” It was by his advice that “he entered as a regular student of law, in the office of the Attorney General.” Younger as I was, by nearly three years, than Mr. Clay, yet I soon learned to appreciate his fine talents and agreeable temper. When I returned from Richmond to my native town of Tappahannock, I corresponded for a short time with him; and I recollect distinctly with what delight he quoted that beautiful and celebrated passage from Mackintosh’s “*Vindiciæ Gallicæ*,” published originally in 1791, in reply to Mr. Burke’s famous letter on the French Revolution:

“It was time,” (said the eloquent Scotchman,) “that the human powers, so long occupied by subordinate objects and inferior arts, should mark the commencement of a new era in history, by giving birth to the art of improving government, and increasing the civil happiness of man. It was time, as it has been wisely and eloquently said, that legislators, instead of that narrow and dastardly coasting, which never ventures to lose sight of usage and precedent, should, guided by the *polarity* of reason, hazard a bolder navigation, and discover, in unexplored regions, the treasure of public felicity.”

But time sped on. Mr. Clay obtained his license to practise law from the Judges of the Court of Appeals, in 1797, and in November of the same year, he moved to Lexington in Kentucky (the child of Virginia) to establish himself in his profession. He rapidly rose, both at the bar and in politics. In 1803 he was elected a member of the Legislature of Kentucky. In 1806 he appeared as

a Senator of the United States, in place of General Adair, whose term expired on the 4th of March, 1807. In the summer following he was again elected to the State Legislature, and was made Speaker of the Assembly. "After a service of two years in that body, he was again, in 1809, returned to the United States Senate, to fill up two years of an unexpired term of the Hon. Buckner Thurston, resigned." (Colton's Life of H. Clay, vol. 1, p. 140.) In 1811, whilst the signs of war were lowering in the horizon, he was elected to the House of Representatives, of which he was appointed Speaker. In June 1812, war was declared against Great Britain. *ended*

During this interval, I had very little intercourse with Mr. Clay. I seldom visited Washington. But in March 1809, I witnessed the inauguration of Mr. Madison, and experienced many courtesies from Mr. Clay. Two days after the declaration of war, I received a very complimentary letter from him, congratulating me on the event, and thanking me for the great exertions I had contributed in bringing it on. Mr. Clay's reputation was in the mean time rapidly advancing. His speech, in 1811, against renewing the charter of the first Bank of the United States, was a brilliant and powerful effort. It defied even his own ingenuity, and all his subsequent efforts, to refute its positions. His exertions during the war of 1812 to defend the "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights" of his country, had sunk deeply into the heart of the nation. In the autumn of 1814, he was associated with four other distinguished citizens, as a Commissioner to Ghent, in the negotiation for peace.

It is not my purpose, at this time, to discuss any party politics. I confine myself to a simple narrative of facts. It is sufficient for me to say, that when I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Clay at Richmond, in the year 1822, when he and Judge Bibb addressed the Legislature of Virginia, as Commissioners from Kentucky, touching a land controversy that had existed between the two States, I found myself at points on various political questions with this distinguished statesman. The reader may form some idea of some of these questions, when I refer to a few good-humored remarks that he addressed to me in the course of a long conversation, which we held together as we promenaded the long room of the Eagle Hotel. Well do I recollect the scene, in consequence of another very interesting topic, which mingled in our conversation. He begged me to believe, that he did not differ with Virginia so much in his general principles or in his measures, as I might have supposed. He said to me, with a great deal of agreeable *naïveté*, that when Virginia was as much overrun with the spurious paper of some thirty or forty Banks, as his own State had been scourged with, I would not be so much surprised at his anxiety to establish a National Bank, in order to regulate the circulation, and to correct the abuse; and, when I had as often crossed the mountains, and traveled the miserable roads, in all seasons of the year, as he was compelled to do on his way to Washington, I might in some degree excuse his anxiety to claim for the General Government the power to prosecute internal improvements.

But our political as well as personal relations began to assume a new character. In 1824, he was announced as a candidate for the Presidency. I felt it to be my duty to oppose his election; and the same opposition was renewed whenever he appeared on the canvass—in 1832, when he was defeated by General Jackson—and in 1844, when, after a severe struggle, he was overcome by Mr.

Polk. Let me say, in justice to the magnanimity which he afterwards displayed, that this opposition on my part was stern and unrelenting. No press in the United States was more determined than the *Richmond Enquirer*. Mr. Clay was the leader of the party, whose principles I opposed. His eloquence, his energy of character, "the vast space he had filled in the eyes of the world," and the towering popularity he had acquired, in his own party, would have given a weight to those principles in the administration of the government, which were regarded by the Democratic party as fatal to the best interests of the country. Besides, Mr. Clay had incurred a serious and bitter opposition, in consequence of his relations to Mr. John Quincy Adams. Of course, all my personal intercourse with Mr. Clay was suspended. I met him, however, in the Senate Chamber of the Capitol on the 4th of March 1837, when Mr. Van Buren was inaugurated President of the United States. A few moments before General Jackson and Mr. Van Buren came into the Chamber, arm and arm, Mr. Clay approached me, and our eyes and hands met together. I told him how happy I was to see that Time had laid his hands so gently upon him. He replied with a smile, lifting up both his hands at the same time. "Ah! I will keep the Old Fellow off as long as I can," and suiting the action to the word, he threw both his arms forward, as if keeping off Time and his fatal scythe.

In 1844, we were entirely separated from each other. His friends had announced him as their candidate, and his letter against the annexation of Texas, had appeared from Raleigh. Through the whole campaign, I opposed him with more vehemence than ever. In a strong speech which he delivered at Petersburg, Virginia, he had attacked me with some bitterness, and with his usual fire. I returned the blow with interest, and never relaxed my efforts, during the whole campaign, until Mr. Polk was returned, by the votes of the Electoral Colleges, the President of the United States.

I have never heard of any unkind expression being used by Mr. Clay against me in private—but he must have been more or less than man, if he had not felt a keen and bitter resentment for the course I had pursued towards him. Mr. Clay remained at Ashland in private life, whilst, contrary to my own wishes, the scenes of my humble drama were shifted to Washington. He remained in retirement during the whole brilliant term of Mr. Polk's administration. Of course, we had not the slightest intercourse with each other, and it was not until the last Congress, that he returned to the Senate. I took it for granted that we should never exchange a word—and, indeed, I had no positive reasons to believe that he was aware of my existence. We passed each other on the Avenue, without the slightest sign of recognition.

In the mean time, the political horizon was becoming more gloomy every day. The mutterings of the tempest were beginning to be heard in the Capitol. The public mind was daily becoming more agitated and anxious about the Union itself. I partook of the general concern, and I could not reconcile it to my sense of duty to retire like Achilles to my tent. On the contrary, I took a very active part in the contest, and never did my poor bark weather so fearful a tempest. She passed through it at last, with all her masts shattered, all her sails torn to pieces, yet with the flag of the Union still flying at her peak. The course I pursued had given offence to many of my best political and personal friends, yet, painful as the result was, I had to bear it all. I may have erred in my course,

but I felt that it was an honest error. And under this impression, whilst the Union was in serious danger, I should have been ashamed to fold my arms in apathy, and let the storm pass on without participating in its dangers. Consequently, I addressed myself to my countrymen at large; and I appealed to Congress, with all the energy of my pen, to adjust this dark and agitating question in all its phases. I repeated my appeals from week to week, and from day to day. As a specimen of the spirit in which I spoke, I beg leave to republish the following article, because it serves to explain a remark from the lips of Mr. Clay, which I shall presently have occasion to recite:

[From the Washington Union, Jan. 29, 1850.]

“*These are the Times which try Men's Souls.*”

When these States first declared their independence, and were about to take their station among the nations of the earth, Thomas Paine proclaimed, in trumpet tones, “these are the times which try men's souls.” Men's souls were tried! Every nerve was stretched, and with a lofty enthusiasm which was worthy of the great cause for which they contended, the people of the *thirteen United States* achieved their independence, and proudly assumed their station among the nations of the world.

This new republic has proved herself worthy of the sacrifices which were made for her establishment, and of the glorious destiny to which she was designed. Rising on a new continent—stripped of the antiquated prejudices and the aristocratic privileges which deface the ancient world—with an immense surface of young and unappropriated land, capable of supporting a teeming population, and of furnishing an asylum to all the oppressed emigrants from Europe—abounding in rivers and sea-coast, and all the facilities of commerce and manufactures—blessed with liberty—and, on all these accounts, productive of an energy of character which has never been equaled by the proudest republics of antiquity, and of an ingenuity and enterprise which are calculated to advance the improvement of the country to an indefinite extent—we have seen this republic of thirteen States swelling into thirty States, and each State exerting her great power in all the forms of social improvement. Agriculture, commerce, manufactures, education, the fine as well as the useful arts, are expanding under the wings of our eagle, until our fame, either in the arts of peace or of war, is filling the world. Shall we see this brilliant spectacle vanish like the fleeting colors of a painted panorama? Shall we see this Union broken up, and the grandest experiment which has ever been made in the annals of man, suddenly arrested by the voice of fanaticism or the torch of discord? Are we not safe in predicting that such a revolution is impossible? But to preserve the liberty which we have obtained, and the innumerable blessings which have flowed in her train, we must recollect again that “these are the times which try men's souls.” This noble constitution must be preserved by the same spirit which assisted in its formation. We must recollect that there is but one rock on which the Union may be split, and that to avoid that fatal shipwreck, we shall require all the energies, all the nerve, all the moral courage, all the prudence, all that spirit of conciliation and compromise, which carried us through the war of '76, and established the constitution of '87. Are not all these elements of social greatness still to be found? Have they been extinguished by avarice, by private ambition or by feindish fanaticism? Have we no great men among us, whose spirits are equal to the storm which threatens our institutions? Have Americans degenerated into cowardly time-servers, or contemptible demagogues? Are men so anxious to ensure their seats in Congress—so much devoted to the vulgar ambition of aspiring to elevated office—so wrapt up in the visionary hopes of attaining even that most unenviable honor of ascending the presidential chair—that they are afraid to venture something for the salvation of their country? We will not believe it. There are yet glorious men in this great republic. There are heroic spirits left, who will dare to do their duty, to risk everything for their country.

He would indeed be unworthy of the incalculable blessings which we enjoy, if he is not prepared to make every exertion and every sacrifice which are neces-

sary to settle this agitating subject. Give us the man who, in such an emergency, in such a cause, and for such a country as this, is prepared to become a martyr, if necessary, for the salvation of our Union. Give us the generous spirit who will say, "What boots it to me if I am cut off from public life, or even from public distinction, for daring to meet the fury of fanaticism, if it will but save the republic? I will do everything for it; nor will I hang back; nor will I dodge the responsibility; nor will I wait till I am called upon to assist my country." Give us men of this character, and the people will at last discover their merits, and bind them to their heart's core. When Lord Chatham, in one of his petulant moods, declared that he could advise the ministry, if he had been asked, the young Earl of Suffolk sprang to his feet and rebuked the illustrious man: "If I saw a dagger presented to the bosom of my mother—and to me my country is dearer than my mother—I should deem myself the most unworthy of her sons, if I waited to be asked to ward off the blow." We are happy to think that there are thousands of such patriots in this blessed land, who will rush to the rescue of the republic. We know of such, and the hour is not far distant when we shall see them energetically discharging their duty in the present Congress.

Let us not deceive ourselves. The ship is in serious danger. The Union is exposed to imminent peril of shipwreck. Trust not to the Executive for relief. General Taylor has missed the opportunity of weaving around his brow a greater glory than he ever reaped upon the field of Buena Vista. He has shrunk from his responsibility. In his late message he has dodged the question. He dare not, as becomes the patriot, meet the crisis. He dare not proclaim that he would veto the Wilmot Proviso, and that he would use his constitutional power to still the tempest. Look not then to him, nor to his hesitating cabinet; but look to the real heroes of the land, who would even sacrifice themselves, like Curtius, to close the breach in the republic. Let us not deceive ourselves. We must compromise the controversy by amicable arrangement. The States stand upon the common platform of equality. They constitute a great partnership of sovereign States; and it is not for one or the other, for this section or for that section, to claim all the benefits of the Union, and avoid any of its burdens. We repeat, the Union is in danger; and it is not force, it is not menace, it is not unkind or uncourteous language, which is to save it. It is conciliation and compromise which have brought this Union together, and must continue to knit it together. In this spirit the Union will remain the proudest monument which man has ever erected, and our country attain a pitch of prosperity which has never been equalled in the world.

"These are, indeed, 'the times that try men's souls.'" *Let us settle the whole question at once, and forever remove this agitating subject from our public councils.*

On the day when this article appeared (viz: Jan. 29th,) Mr. Clay came forward with his first celebrated series of Compromise resolutions, supported by one of those powerful speeches which were wont to emanate from his able and eloquent mind. I admired the patriotic motive from which it proceeded, but was unfortunate enough to differ with him about the propriety of his proposition. I expressed that dissent in frank but respectful terms. Mr. Clay followed up his blow, by a very elaborate speech, which he delivered on the 5th of February, and continued on the 6th. He spoke at great length, and with the most impressive ability. On the very next morning, (the 7th of February,) I again took the liberty of reviewing his course, and I stated all my objections frankly—and especially to his recognition of the Mexican law:

"It is plain" (said the Union of the 7th of February) "that this resolution, if embodied in a law, would amount to a legislative assurance that the essence of the Wilmot Proviso is already in force in the territories we have recently acquired. Yet this assurance, which denies to the South, just as effectually as the Wilmot Proviso itself, any share of the Territories acquired from Mexico, Mr. Clay terms a Compromise. We say, and indeed Mr. Clay virtually admits, that it is the Wilmot Proviso, with hardly a decent disguise; yea, even worse than the naked Proviso, from the effort which is made to conceal it. We must say that

Mr. Clay has not sufficiently appreciated the good sense of the American people, by his attempt to palm off this proposition as a compromise founded on mutual forbearance and concession. Mr. Clay asserts that the Mexican edict abolishing slavery is tantamount to the Wilmot Proviso. If he be earnest in that belief, why, let us ask, does he not leave that edict to be disposed of according to the laws of nations and the principles of the constitution?"

This editorial of the "Union" concluded as follows:

"But so far as we have seen or heard Mr. Clay's argument—so far as we have weighed his propositions—anxious as we were to hail them as the harbingers of peace—willing as we are to take any man for our leader who will strike out a plan for saving the *rights of the States and the Union of the States*—we must proclaim boldly that Mr. Clay has failed in his object; that his scheme presents no available compromise; that it is no olive branch, as he called it yesterday; and that we must now look to clearer, and more generous and more intrepid spirits to save the Union from the horrors which he so eloquently predicted. Men there are in Congress, who have the ability and the patriotism to risk themselves for this glorious Union—who, like Curtius, would plunge into the fiery gulf for the salvation of their country, (*and such a country!*) To these men we must now look; but not to the compromise of Mr. Clay!"

Now, mark my relations to Mr. Clay—and mark too the course which he pursued at this fearful crisis. Remember, that I had opposed for so many years his earnest aspirations. Remember, that no press in this country had so pertinaciously thwarted his election to the Presidency as the Richmond Enquirer. Mark, that our intercourse had been suspended for years! and that he must have come to Washington with unkind and even embittered feelings towards me. More than eight weeks had passed at Washington, and I had not said a syllable to propitiate this popular and highly distinguished man. On the contrary, when he came forward to present his resolutions for compromise, backed as they were by one of his memorable speeches, the "Union" criticised them freely—and placed him in the ungracious position, that he had brought forward a scheme which was no available compromise—an olive branch, which did not deserve the name—and, putting him aside, that "we must now look to clearer, and more generous, and more intrepid spirits to save the Union from the horrors which he so eloquently predicted." Now, mark the beauty of his conduct. See what magnanimity he could exhibit—and how completely his love of country could override his private griefs and his party feelings. The very morning after the preceding article appeared in the "Union," Mr. Clay transmitted the message which is related in the following narrative:

NEW YORK, JULY 10th, 1852.

THOMAS RITCHIE, Esq.

DEAR SIR,

By some accident your esteemed favor of the 30th ult., did not reach me until to-day.

In cheerful compliance with your request, I proceed to give a brief statement of circumstances within my knowledge previous and relating to the interview with the lamented HENRY CLAY, to which you refer.

You will remember that during the eventful congressional session of 1849-50—in which the compromise measures were passed—I was connected with the official corps of Reporters for the U. S. Senate. In fulfilling my professional duties, it was my privilege to spend many hours in the rooms of the distinguished statesman whose loss the nation has been so recently called to mourn.

Early in the month of February 1850, Mr. CLAY expressed his profound regret that you misunderstood his position on the agitating question then under discussion, and had deemed it your duty to assail what you understood to be his views, in the columns of the *Union*. Satisfied that a free conference with you

would create a better understanding and secure your aid and co-operation in the ratification by Congress of his series of resolutions on the subject of agitation, he intimated the wish that I should bring about a confidential interview with you.

I shall never forget Mr. CLAY's look and manner when the probability suggested itself to his mind that his motives for seeking an interview with the leading editor of the great party to which he had been so long and decidedly opposed, might be misapprehended. His proud spirit shrunk from the suspicion that he sought indemnity against assault upon his own acts or fame, on his own behalf.*

But, he said, the work in which he was engaged was far above and beyond all personal or party considerations, and he could not hesitate. He remarked: "Mr. Ritchie has abused me in his paper, which he had the right to do. He may abuse me again; which he has the same right to do. But the country is in danger; the Union is threatened. I wish to see Mr. Ritchie, that we may confer together on the best means of saving this glorious Union. For myself, I care nothing. So far as Mr. Ritchie doubts my motives and condemns acts springing from a source he mistrusts, I have nothing to say. But, for the sake of our common country, I would convince him of the necessity for some decided, thorough, united action, to save the country, and agree with him upon the means best calculated to secure that result. I think I can show him that the plan I propose is worthy of his support, and that I would have him aid me instead of counteracting my aims. When these threatening difficulties are disposed of, let Mr. Ritchie judge and speak freely, as he thinks appropriate, of my poor self; I shall not complain. Now, however, I would have a brief lull in the storm, that our bark may be trimmed for the gale. That accomplished, I care nothing for what follows."

The date of this communication will show, if I mistake not, that the plan of several distinct, yet united measures, as a "Compromise," had not at that time been promulgated or formed.†

I called upon you and stated Mr. Clay's wishes, repeating as literally as I could his most important words, then fresh upon my memory. I need not say that you met his proposition with frankness and cordiality. You said Mr. Clay had acted as became him, and that you would yourself have done the same thing by him if you had supposed the country had approached so very near to the abyss as he apprehended; that you were indeed awfully impressed with the crisis which was at hand; that every considerate man must admit that the Union was in danger; and, unless some measures were adopted to save it, in imminent danger—and that you would most cheerfully meet Mr. Clay at any time and place he would appoint—most respectfully appreciating the patriotic motives by which he was actuated. Nor do I forget that this decision on your part was not made without a due sense of Mr. Clay's colloquial powers. You freely admitted his great tact in discussion; but said at the same time, with a smile, that you had your own opinions on the subject, and had freely expressed them; but whatever might be Mr. Clay's powers, he would not expect you to yield them until your judgment was convinced: you would, therefore, meet him for the purpose of a free, frank and friendly conference. You suggested an interview at Mr. C.'s rooms at the National Hotel.

* Mr. S. in a private letter, says:

"My first conversation with Mr. Clay occupied, I should think, an hour at least. He did me the honor to ask how the propriety of such an interview struck me, and how I thought you would receive the proposition, and talked the whole matter over very freely. Of course I could not publish any allusion of that kind, as it would look like egotistic assumption. Yet it is a pleasure to me to know that Mr. Clay did manifest a confidence in me which was apparent to those of my friends who knew at the time the circumstances which brought me frequently in close contact with him."

It is due to truth to state what Mr. S.'s modesty would conceal.

† Mr. Simonton is not as correct on this point as he usually is. Mr. Clay's Resolutions were laid before the Senate on the 29th January, 1850, ten days before this conversation took place. These resolutions embraced all the elements of the Compromise—and in the first speech which accompanied their production, he spoke of them in this light: "Taken in combination together (says he) they propose an amicable arrangement of all the questions in controversy between the free and slave States, growing out of the subject of the institution of slavery." Towards the close of the same speech, he begs "every Senator to examine this plan of accommodation which this series of resolutions presents."

I addressed Mr. Clay in writing, informing him of the result of my mission. The following is a copy of his reply, the original of which is still in my possession :

"DEAR SIR,

"I thank you for your prompt execution of the commission which I confided to you. I will see Mr. R. with great pleasure at my lodgings on Sunday next, between the hours of 1 and 3, as suggested. Or, if, on further reflection, he should prefer it, I will attend Mr. Pyne's Church on Sunday next, and immediately after the conclusion of Divine service, I will go to Mr. R.'s private residence.

"If the latter arrangement should be preferred, be pleased to inform me. Otherwise, I shall expect Mr. R. at my lodgings.

With great regard,

"Mr. J. W. SIMONTON,
S. Chamber, 8th Feb. 1850."

H. CLAY."

I called upon you the same evening, and showed you the foregoing note. You stated at once that it would never do for Mr. Clay to pass from Dr. PYNE'S church to your own house; that, wherever he went, he was the "observed of all observers;" that such a visit would give rise to a great deal of idle curiosity and speculation; and that it was far better for you to visit him at his own public hotel. If he had no objection, therefore, you proposed to call upon him at the National Hotel at 4 o'clock in the evening of Sunday next, (our conversation, I think, being on Friday.) You also asked of Mr. C. the favor of bringing a friend with you, not for the purpose of having a witness of the interview, nor a recorder of the transaction, but because that friend [I understood perfectly well at the time, and so told Mr. Clay, that you referred to the Hon. Thomas H. Bayly of Va.] was also Mr. C.'s personal friend; because he was better acquainted than yourself with the whole question, and with the sentiment of the South; and because, if you could agree upon anything, that gentleman was in so conspicuous a position in the House of Representatives that he could give the most effective assistance to any measure which *he* might approve.

Mr. Clay agreed to the time and place thus designated, and sent word to you, through myself, that you might bring as many friends with you as you wished. The interview, thus arranged, was held at the time and place appointed. Of its events and results you can speak most fittingly.

Trusting that the foregoing statement fulfills the conditions of the request by which you have honored me,

I remain yours, with sincere respect,

JAMES W. SIMONTON.

Our fellow-citizens of the North will see, from this whole movement, the awful presentiments which Mr. Clay had formed, of the dangers threatening the stability of the Union from the then existing crisis.

On the evening of the 10th of February, General Bayly and myself waited on Mr. Clay at his room, in the National Hotel. It was one of the most remarkable interviews which ever took place in this city. He received us with the most winning courtesy and kindness. He treated me as if no unpleasant relations had ever existed between us. I shall not detail all the particulars of our conversation. We began by going back to our early acquaintance, the friends we had known, and even the frolics which had amused us in Richmond. We passed on to some subsequent events in our lives, and he assured me, that though we had been parted for years, he had never lost sight of me—that he had constantly read my paper, and that when the mail arrived at Ashland, Mrs. Clay was in the habit of selecting it first from the budget before her. He expressed the profound interest which he took in the leading questions of the day, and the anxieties he felt about the Union itself. He regretted that I had formed so unfavorable an opinion about his resolutions, and said that he had been "hurried" into their presentation by the strong appeals I had addressed to Congress. (See the preceding narrative.)

We then proceeded to a critical analysis of his resolutions of Compromise.

We commented upon the policy which it was proper to pursue in relation to California. We devoted some time to the recognition which he had virtually given, in his resolutions and speech, of the Mexican Law, in respect to slavery in New Mexico. I contended that the South would never acquiesce in this feature, because the recognition of the validity of the Mexican Law, by an act of Congress, was equivalent to the Wilmot Proviso. Upon this point there was a great deal of ingenuity and learning exhibited on the part of General Bayly, as well as Mr. Clay, in which Gen. B. sustained our view. So frank was our conference, and with such courtesy did he demean himself, that Mr. Clay even received, with the utmost patience, the observation I threw out, that as it was necessary to strike the Mexican Law from his resolutions, I had been thinking how that object was to be accomplished, and that I would respectfully suggest to him to follow his own precedent during the Missouri controversy, and move a committee of thirteen, to whom the *whole subject* should be referred, and settled at once—never again to be disturbed. On the question of Texas, Mr. Clay conversed with great frankness. He saw there was great danger of collision between the government of the United States and the people of Texas—and he spoke at some length of the boundaries which Texas should possess, and the amount which should be paid to her. Upon the passage of a law for the restoration of fugitive slaves, he was most emphatic and decided. It was an essential part of the system—and it would be idle to attempt anything, unless it were effectually to be provided for. He touched upon the sale of slaves imported into the District of Columbia. And in fact there was no branch of the subject on which the three persons present did not freely express their opinion, my friend General Bayly taking a most active and efficient part in the whole conversation. There was but one sentiment among them on one point—and that was, it was necessary to settle the whole subject *at once and forever*, in order to secure the peace, the union, and the permanent prosperity of our country.

As I rose to leave the room, I asked Mr. Clay if I did not understand him as saying, that the whole question was to be settled at once, by a fair and liberal compromise—"Everything or Nothing?" He cordially assented to this idea. I then frankly asked him, whether, if nothing else could be effected to save the Union, would he agree to the adoption of the Missouri Compromise? He as frankly replied, substantially, and nearly in the words, as follows: "As far as I am *personally* concerned, I can have no objection to the Missouri Compromise line, but I do not think it will be agreed to—nor do I see what the South is to gain by it. If, however, it can be agreed to, and if it be satisfactory, I will acquiesce in it for the sake of the public tranquillity." After finally telling him that I would see him again, if it were necessary to renew the conversation, we took our leave.

I have never seen any one conduct himself with more frankness and dignity, than Mr. Clay, during the whole of this interview. I left him, deeply impressed with his love of country, his devotion to the Union, and the conciliatory spirit in which he was attempting to secure it. How superior did he rise, above all private feuds and party considerations! With what indefatigable zeal, and with what an indomitable spirit did he pursue the great object he had in view! But his numerous speeches, elaborate as well as impromptu, bear witness to his energy, ability and devotion to the Union. The labors of the day, and the vigils

of the night, were consecrated to this object—until at last his constitution began to give way, and the foundation was laid of that fatal disease which has sent him to his tomb, a martyr in the public service.

Yet Mr. Clay was as fortunate in his death as he was in his life. He died, amid all the consolations of religion, with the respect of his country, and the sincere regrets of many a man who had been once his political enemy. He died after having seen the Compromise, to which he had devoted the last years of his life, adopted as the platform of both conventions of both political parties.

And let me add, *now* that the Compromise is adopted, when almost all its elements are placed, by the very force of circumstances, beyond the reach of change—except the fugitive slave law; and now, when that measure furnishes only practical compensation to the South, for the sacrifices she sustains, how mad and mischievous are all the efforts which are made for the repeal of that measure. Such speeches as those of Mr. Sumner, and such letters as those of Mr. Chase, are, really, so many blows leveled at the Union itself. Their object cannot be accomplished, without prostrating the pillars of the Constitution. It is my duty to speak upon this subject! Moreover, I have a right to speak! No man is more sincerely devoted to the Union than I am. I have given some evidence of this feeling, in the efforts I have made to secure the Compromise. I have given some evidence of this feeling, in fearlessly meeting the storm which gathered around my own head. When some of my warmest personal and political friends were deserting and denouncing me, I still stood my ground, and said, "Let us save this glorious Union. Let us adopt the Compromise. But when adopted, the North must adhere to the Fugitive Slave Law." Let me say too, that few men are better acquainted with the South than myself. I know her people infinitely better than Messrs. Seward, Sumner or Chase can know them. I declare, in the face of this nation, that the repeal of that law will sound the tocsin of dissolution. I expressed this sentiment at the moment of adopting the Compromise, and I repeat the declaration *now*, when my firm opinion has been still further confirmed by the subsequent declaration and the present feeling of the people of Virginia, whose discretion contributed so much to still the tempest. I find the echo of these sentiments in my own heart. Prostrate this Compromise, and upon what other Compromise can you rally? If the North is so far guilty of bad faith as to violate the solemn statute of the land, how can the South trust her again? "Thus far we were willing to go—thus far have we gone—but not an inch further." We but repeat at this time, what we proclaimed upon the house-tops during the agitation of the storm, and amid "the rocking of the battlements." What did we say, for example, on the 25th June, 1850?

"We are striving to save the peace of our country, and to preserve her Union. We see sufficiently well, that it must be effected by conciliation and compromise. The only question is, Which alternative is best calculated to that purpose? We would not vote for the admission of California *per se*; but we waive all our objections to the measure, if it can be made a part of a system of Compromise to give peace to the Republic. The Compromise prostrates the Wilnot Proviso, the most insidious form which abolitionism has ever assumed, and the most fatal to the South; for this compromise organizes territorial governments for Utah and New Mexico without any restriction on slavery. *Of course*, there is an express understanding that it is to be a solemn compact, binding upon the North as well as the South; and that if this system is hereafter

to be disturbed by the influence of fanaticism; if the grossest violation of good faith is to be added to the violence of aggression, the South will then be prepared to say that she can no longer put faith in our Northern brethren, and *that it will be time to part*. We follow no man's lead but our own. Glimmering as the light may be, which directs our path, we are prepared to tread it for ourselves. We may be struck down in the struggle; but let this inscription be written on our tomb: "Here lies a man who never turned his back upon his country, who was always devoted to his friends, and never dreaded his enemies."

What did we say in the "Union" of the 12th July, 1850?

"When this compact is made, we shall hold all parts of the confederacy solemnly bound to enforce it. Should the fanatics of the North attempt to overleap it, then let our Northern brethren be warned of the consequences. The South never would trust them again. They could never parley or compromise again, even with their countrymen who *could be capable of violating all good faith in the most delicate matter which can concern the South, and in the only one which is calculated to alienate the feelings of each from the other, to break all relations between them, (and if we must speak the truth) to break the Union asunder*. We repeat, we have a right to speak on this subject, because we trust we are known to be the devoted friends of this glorious Union—but there can be no Union where discord only prevails. We repeat with the Tennessean, "*THE UNION—only under the guaranties of the constitution*." But we are assured, that if this controversy be now adjusted in a spirit of conciliation and compromise, it will preserve the Union from further extreme agitation, and that the great majority of our Northern brethren will protect the compact from the assaults of the Fanatics."

[From the Washington Union, of Sept. 15, 1850.]

(Immediately after the passage of the Compromise Measures.)

"We look forward to the prospect before us with the most cheering anticipations. But we cannot leave the subject without at the same time warning our countrymen, from the dangers which we have passed, to avoid their repetition. The system which has just been adopted by Congress, we consider as a solemn covenant between the North and the South. The abolitionists and freesoilers are the common enemies of the country, and they must be kept down. Fanaticism never sleeps, and therefore it must be carefully watched. Let our Northern brethren keep down the atrocious spirit. The interference of the Abolitionists can do no good in any sense of the term. It does not meliorate the condition of the slave. On the contrary, it makes everything worse. It renders a stronger police necessary, affecting the education, the religious meetings, the locomotion of the slave," &c., &c. "It is now our great desire to rally the Democratic party, and to re-unite it in all its vigor upon its ancient platform. To effect this object, we must cultivate harmony and concession; we must not denounce and abuse each other, but bear and forbear, and allow for the honest differences of opinion which have recently prevailed to so great a degree among us. The Whigs, too, will rally under their own banner; but such is our confidence in the majesty of truth, that we fear nothing from them. Plant but the foot of McGregor upon his native heath, and he may defy them all."

But I forbear. I did not sit down to re-echo my own sentiments, or to repeat the warnings which I echoed during the agitation of the tempest of 1850, but to pay the tribute that I owed to the memory of Mr. Clay. From the moment of our interview, in February in 1850, he became my friend. He expressed this sentiment in private circles. He proclaimed it within the Senate chamber, at one of the most interesting periods of my life. But it is my object now only to redeem my promise, and to plant one humble laurel on his tomb. My great aim is to do justice to Mr. Clay's frank and magnanimous conduct, in seeking an interview with a political opponent, for the purpose of bringing about a co-operation in an important crisis of public affairs, not for the personal benefit of either, but for the sake of our common country.

THOMAS RITCHIE.





